

PETERSON'S MAGAZINE.

VOL. LXXXVII.

PHILADELPHIA, MAY, 1885.

No. 5.

CARLYLE AND CARLYLE'S WIFE.

BY EMILY J. MACKINTOSH.



JANE WELSH CARLYLE: WIFE OF CARLYLE.

THE controversy which raged so hotly, after the appearance of Froude's "Life and Letters of Carlyle," has at last died down. Nor would it benefit the world to rekindle the faded embers. As to the attitude which a biographer should hold towards the dead, there will always be a difference of opinion. One side will think it better to indite rose-water memoirs, in which all the salient points of character have been polished away by incessant adulation. The other, remembering what Cromwell said to Lely: "Paint my face—mole and all," will endeavor to depict the real man, with his foibles as well as his virtues.

All parties, however, are substantially agreed, at last, as to the character of Carlyle. Even those who censure Froude for his frankness describe Carlyle in much the same way as Froude does. It is impossible, indeed, to read the letters and diary of Carlyle, or the letters of his wife, and entertain two opinions on the subject. The judgment pronounced by one mind may differ slightly from that pronounced by another, as to details; but, in all material respects, the judgment will be the same. Now, what is that judgment?

And first as to Carlyle's literary position. Was he the prophet that his admirers, forty years ago, when he was at the zenith of his popularity, considered him to be? It is generally conceded, we think, that he was not. His writings, as a whole, were destructive, not constructive: he was always finding fault, never suggesting a remedy. His "Cry aloud, and spare not" was rather the voice of hopeless despair than that of faith or even wisdom. His influence, so far as it went, was to deify strength, and regard success as a proof of merit; in short, to take it for granted that "might was right." Otherwise, Providence—for this is really his philosophy—would have ordered things otherwise. This may not have been consciously his intention, perhaps. But, in elevating Frederick the Great on a pedestal, and calling on the world to bow down and worship the robber of Silesia, Carlyle did what he could to teach men to regard cynicism, breach of faith, all the worst vices of the Machiavellian policy, as justifiable, provided success attended them. What is this but the maxim, in another shape, that the "end sanctifies the means"? (413)



THOMAS CARLYLE.

What is this, to parody one of Carlyle's own phrases, but devil-worship?

Carlyle's favorite saying was: "The real ruler ought to rule." What? Even if the ruler has achieved his position by fraud, or treachery, or brute force? Why, if that is so, there is no tyranny that ever blighted nations which cannot be justified. But perhaps Carlyle meant, by a "real ruler," the ruler most fitted for his work. If so, the saying is the most patent of truisms. The practical point is "how to get such a ruler." Carlyle said that universal suffrage would not secure the "best" man. But then will the "divine right of kings"? Will an "hereditary aristocracy"? In short, Carlyle, at his best, only echoed the feeling of every sincere soul—that wrong reigns everywhere, and that the world is "out of joint." "How long, oh, Lord! how long?" has been the cry of martyrs—and that, also, of every friend of humanity—for thousands of years. But to utter such a cry does not make a man a prophet. The real "leader of men" must do more: he

must show the way out of the wilderness. And, as Carlyle has not done this, we deny that he was a prophet.

That this is no one-sided judgment may be shown by a few extracts from the *British Quarterly Review*. That able radical journal, while censuring Froude, actually speaks more harshly of Carlyle than Froude, even at his worst. Of Carlyle's "French Revolution"—undoubtedly the book that will live longer than any other by him—it says: "After all, brilliantly as Carlyle had shown the woes of the time—had said to the heart of man: 'Thou ailest here and here'—there was no remedy proposed but force, no comfort but in acquiescence, no hope, and no rest. Altogether a negative preacher, then and henceforward. He has no gospel for his own or any age." And, again: "Of mature men who remain his disciples, the number

at any given time will be very few."

Yet, though not a prophet, Carlyle was, and always will be, eminent in literature. If we overlook the moral teachings of his "Cromwell" and "Frederick the Great," and regard them only as artistic creations, we shall find them picturesque in description, with a wonderful insight into character, and showing a rare grasp of the social and political conditions of the time. Few men paint battle-scenes so graphically: we can recall no one except Napier, in his "Peninsular War." Carlyle's style, at first, is a difficult culty; but the reader soon gets accustomed to it. "When once its trick is mastered, it is felt to be," says the *British Quarterly*, "in keeping with its stormy subject."

But it is rather in his behavior as a man, and especially in his conduct as a husband, that we propose to discuss Carlyle. His character, perhaps, can be interpreted the most fairly if we take into consideration his birth and early surroundings. Born of poor parents—what

would be called peasants in England—he never had the advantage of that social culture which goes so far in softening the friction of life. He mistook bluntness for sincerity, courtesy and breadth of thought for sham. He was rude, impatient of difference of opinion, excessively dogmatic. "He never, in any degree," says the writer we have already quoted, "struggled against his tempers and his fancies. At all times, in speech as in manner, he was rough, rugged, and even brutal, while craving for sympathy. He hated fools, in which class he comprised the majority of the men he saw; so that, while needing to be taken out of self, he kept at bay many of his best friends." That—hating fools—is a key to the situation. In the higher sense, Carlyle was wanting in charity. For fools, after all, are to be pitied, not hated. No fool prefers to be a fool: he is born so; and to hate people for what they

certain kinds of work, is simply—not to mince words—brutal and selfish. It is very easy to persuade yourself that you stand on a different platform from others—most literary men have a curious knack of deceiving themselves in this way; but the same duties fall to the lot of a married man—even if a genius—as to others, and he is a coward, or worse, to shirk them. Very few "bread-winners" have "a bed of roses." To earn an honest livelihood is not, at the best, play. It means always more or less self-sacrifice. Thackeray, on this subject, used to speak very plainly. There was nothing, he said, in the mere being a literary man, that absolved one from paying one's debts, or finding bread honestly for one's children.

The point we make—and in this we do not wish to be misunderstood—is that, however heroic it might have been in Carlyle, if single,



HOUSE AT CRAIGENPUTTOCK, WHERE THE CARLYLES LIVED.

cannot help is certainly not honorable or just, much less Christian. But Carlyle not only "kept at bay many of his best friends," he was singularly unjust to them.

"To turn over the record of men," says the British Quarterly, "with whom Carlyle was intimate throughout his life, is to read a tirade of sarcastic abuse, with a want of real insight"—strange in any man, much less in one pretending he had a mission to carry out and a gospel to preach. In justice to Carlyle, however, it must be said that he suffered acutely from dyspepsia, and that his rudeness of manner was often the result of the irritability this caused. But the great error of Carlyle's life was in marrying as he did, if not—to speak very frankly—in marrying at all. When a man takes a woman to his hearth, it is under the implied condition that he will try, at least, to support her. Now, this Carlyle did not do. He regarded his genius as involving a duty to write only certain things; and, as the world did not happen to want those things, he had, in consequence, no means of earning money. Many other literary men take, and are now taking, the same ground. The answer to all this is: that, with such views, they have no right to bring a wife into their lives. If they have "a gospel to preach," let them take the staff and scrip, and go forth alone. To starve their family, because they do not like

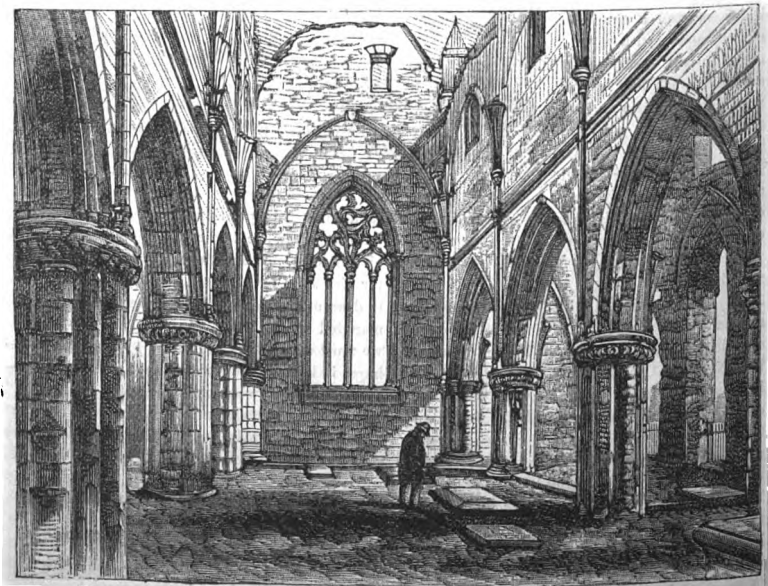
to assume this position, he ought not to have done it when he had a wife who was to be the victim of it. If he was willing to be a martyr for the sake of his "mission," he had no right to drag others down into the amphitheatre, to be mangled by the lions. In the cause of the sex, we must at least go so far as to say this. Perhaps, if it had been a union of real affection—a marriage of what is called "old-fashioned" love—Mrs. Carlyle might have endured her martyrdom unshrinkingly. But here is where the trouble really lay. Neither Carlyle nor she, when they married, loved each other, in any true sense of the word; and they never, which is worse, came to do it afterward.

We say emphatically, therefore, that Carlyle should never have married at all, with his views as to what he would do, and would not

do, to earn a living. But, if he did marry, he should have married some woman who had been brought up to wash, and bake, and scrub, and light his fires: in a word, to whom such a life would not have been a new thing, such menial employments not unaccustomed work. Instead of that, he married the only child of a successful physician—a descendant of John Knox, the great Scottish reformer, and a gentleman of culture and some fortune. The daughter, in consequence, had been accustomed to all the comforts and even many of the luxuries of life, and had been literally a "petted darling" all her days. This delicately-nurtured woman Carlyle carried off, when money began to get scarce, to a lonely farm which she had inherited, and there kept her for years, miles from any congenial neighbors, while he pursued his literary work—taking it up or laying it down, by the bye, just as the mood seized him; while she, a delicate and refined woman, as we have seen, reared in comparative-affluence, had to do her own housework: to scrub floors, to wash and iron, to perform all sorts of menial offices. To her credit be it said, she did all this, or tried her best to do this: getting, however—and this is the cruel part of it—no credit for her sacrifices, in return. Had her slavery been mitigated by kindness on her husband's part, the yoke could have been better

borne; but Carlyle never praised her or sympathized with her: his mother had slaved in that way, and he never thought it odd in his wife to do it; on the contrary, he was only too quick to find fault when things went even a little wrong. As Froude says, he "seemed to take everything that was done for him as a matter of course, and to growl if anything was not to his mind." If the windows creaked or the cocks crowed next door, he was irritable with Mrs. Carlyle. After making every allowance, it must be admitted that he was intensely selfish; unconsciously so, perhaps, but nevertheless selfish to the core. Intellectually, he had no tolerance for anybody who held a different opinion from himself; physically, it was his own comfort he thought of first, if not last, if not all the time. As the *British Quarterly* says: "The son of an Annandale peasant, he was accustomed to live meanly and poorly: she was not. And he never made sufficient allowance for the difficulties and trials which she had to bear: they would have been greatly lightened by a few kind words."

After living for several years at Craigenputtock, the hill-side farm to which we have alluded, Carlyle moved to London. His whole capital, at this time, consisted of about a thousand dollars. A small house was taken in Chelsea, and in this house he lived, not only until his wife's death,



CHURCH OF WADDINGTON ABBEY, WITH MRS. CARLYLE'S GRAVE.

but until his own. The struggle with poverty, for a long time, was very bitter. But there were, from the very first, kind friends who did all they could to soften the lot of the Carlyles, socially and otherwise. "Poor as they were," says the writer in the *British Quarterly*, "society, and that of the very best kind, was gradually opening to them, and Carlyle, much as he railed at it, was pleased and flattered by the attention shown him." Among the houses to which he was thus made free was that of Mr. Baring—afterwards Lord Ashburton—whose wife, Lady Harriet Baring, was a woman of great accomplishments, and, when she chose, of singularly magnetic manners. She admired Carlyle; had him often at her house; and in many ways tried to make his hard life less hard. There is no doubt that Carlyle was fascinated, in some degree at least, by the notice of this fashionable "grand dame." Do not let us be misunderstood. There never was anything like a flirtation; there was not even the slightest approach to it: such a thing would have been impossible on Lady Harriet's part, even if possible on his. But, after a while, Mrs. Carlyle grew jealous. We have heard it said often that she was jealous without cause. Perhaps she was, if it is put as an abstract question: but it was exceedingly natural on the part of any wife; and, if Carlyle had been a man of finer sensibilities, he would have realized this. It is very hard, we take it, for a woman to see her husband invited to the house of a patrician dame, and made much of there, while she has to stay at home to wash, and scrub, and scour, and bake: to be rewarded, perhaps, on his return, by reproof if the windows rattle, or a stray button comes off, or he has eaten anything that happens to disagree with him. It does not improve matters, even when the wife is invited to accompany her husband, if, though treated with courtesy and even kindness, she feels that her hostess and she are not in sympathy: that she is left, so to speak, in the "outer court": that it is only her husband who really enters the sacred precincts within. Nor is the tragedy lightened when the wife has to contrast her scanty wardrobe and her harassed air with the tasteful surroundings and the calm patrician ease that comes of having no sordid worries in life. Before condemning Mrs. Carlyle, put yourself in her place.

It is well to know, however, that all parties in this tangled affair—in some of its aspects almost a tragedy—came to understand each other better towards the last. Lady Harriet died long before either of the Carlyles. Her husband married again, and, with the second Lady Ashburton, none of these heart-burnings arose. On Mrs. Car-



HOUSE AT ECCLEFECHAN, WHERE CARLYLE WAS BORN.

lyle's death, and when Carlyle awoke to a sense of his loss—when a remorse for the past took possession of him such as is revealed nowhere else in any autobiography—it was this second Lady Ashburton who persuaded him to come to her villa on the Riviera, and it was she who brought comfort to the weary old man's almost broken heart. In dismissing this sad story, we do not know that we can do better than to quote once more from the *British Quarterly*. "Mrs. Carlyle," says that journal, "married a man whom she did not love, because she thought him intellectually great; and that intellectual greatness never satisfied her woman's heart. She was a gently-nurtured lady, and he was long in unlearning the ways of a Scotch peasant." Every woman, at least, will agree to the substantial justice of this verdict.

In some respects, Mrs. Carlyle was more than the equal of her husband. She was bright and vivacious, with many rare gifts and accomplishments: a woman that would have shone in the very highest circles. The most intellectual men in London were proud of her acquaintance, were cheered by her sallies, and were soothed by her sympathies. She was witty, too, as well as accomplished. Her letters are simply charming. Had she been married to a different man, she might have been very happy. We doubt whether Carlyle could have made any woman happy.

Mrs. Carlyle was buried by the side of her father, in the choir of the beautiful but ruined old abbey-church at Haddington, where she had lived as a child. Carlyle sleeps among his kinsfolk, in the bleak graveyard at Ecclefechan, the little Scotch village where he was born.